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THE
MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

IN THE
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



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THE MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

IN THE

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

To answer questions which have been asked concerning the manuscript collections in the Library of Congress, the following information is published:

The Library is the custodian of about 600 separate collections of manuscripts, varying in size from collections which comprise only a few documents to those which contain many thousands of documents. There are at least a million separate manuscripts in the combined collections.

THE COLLECTIONS.

The collections cover the whole field of history—political, military, scientific, artistic, religious, literary, social, and economic. For example, there are the papers of 11 of the Presidents of the United States; of the Continental Congress; of Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Daniel Webster, William L. Marcy, James H.

Hammond, of South Carolina, and Edwin M. Stanton; of Gens. Sherman, McClellan, and Beauregard; of Paul Jones, Alexander Cockburn, and Ericsson; of Simon Newcomb and Matthew F. Maury; of the Shakers, Rev. John Witherspoon and Rev. Moses Waddell; of Louise Chandler Moulton and William Gilmore Simms; of Dolly Madison and Margaret Bayard Smith; and the account books of plantations and old mercantile firms.

The purpose of the collections is to preserve and make available to historical scholars and students the record upon which history is based, the original documents which tell the true story,

PURPOSE. the intimate correspondence of the actors in history, which discloses the facts, the motives and characteristics of the actors themselves, and revives the atmosphere of past times. It is not too much to say that no one can write history satisfactorily unless he has access to the manuscript materials for history.

The collections have come to the Library, some by transfer from other Departments of the Government, but most of them from

SOURCE OF COLLECTIONS. the descendents of the historical characters to whom the manuscripts pertain. Some of the collections are obtained by gift, some by pur-

chase, and some are deposited, the title remaining with the depositors.

Persons who are not accustomed to use manuscripts are apt to suppose that the Library merely desires to obtain examples of the writing of famous and prominent people. While the collection of autographic documents is one of the Library's functions, it is a lesser and subordinate function, and is satisfied, in most cases, as an incident to the historical purposes for which the collections are made.

What the Library wants is all the papers which an historical character gathered and preserved in the course of his career, and which have survived him—the notes, memoranda, diaries, drafts of speeches, articles, or letters which he kept (the letters to him and from him), his accounts—in a word all the written evidences of his activities, personal or public. In the case of a man of methodical habits, who preserved his papers, and whose papers have escaped destruction or dispersion, there may be many trivial and apparently unimportant writings among them; but even these play a part in reconstructing the life and times in which he lived and have significance to the historical investigator.

Therefore the Library, when it acquires a collection of papers, desires, if possible, to itself

judge what papers should be destroyed as useless.

DESTRUCTION OF PAPERS. The layman who makes selection seldom understands the professional point of view and may withdraw papers which have real historical value. He may, for example, destroy accounts of household expenses; yet, if the papers are old, these contain valuable economic history.

Purely personal family letters and intimate affectionate correspondence belong in another category. Descendants may object to such papers being open to inspection. If they do object, such papers should be withdrawn; but the Library will withdraw them if the papers are intrusted to its examination, putting itself in the place of the descendants and making the examination from their point of view. It returns such papers to the proper persons, to be disposed of by them.

FAMILY LETTERS.

It is a laborious task, requiring practice and special facilities, to examine a large collection of manuscripts. Laymen who attempt it generally fail to finish it. The Library, on the other hand, can examine a collection in a comparatively brief period of time, and can separate from the main collection such papers as do not properly belong in a public depository. The papers are not open to inspection until the separation has been made.

EXAMINATION OF MANUSCRIPTS.

The several advantages to be derived from placing collections of papers in the Library are:

1. To preserve them. Here they are in an institution which is a department of the Government—the most permanent abiding place that can be found for them. They are in a fireproof building, which has no other buildings near it.

They are in locked compartments of steel and plate glass, under guard day and night.

ADVANTAGES.

They have the care of expert manuscript repairers and of a regular force of trained archivists. They are as far beyond danger of loss, dispersion, or deterioration as it is possible for them to be.

2. To contribute to the truth of history. While they are in private hands, they are inaccessible to historians. Their existence is not generally known. There are no facilities for their use.

3. To give the individual, whose papers they were, the place in history to which he may be entitled. The historian is a reporter. He must have material to write about. The public man whose papers are accessible takes a more conspicuous place in history than the public man whose papers have been destroyed or are kept in private hands. To keep the papers of a public man in private hands is to deprive him of the abiding fame to obtain which was one of the motives of his life.

Some persons who have historical manuscripts are anxious to have them in a safe place and available for historical use, but are unwilling to part with all ownership in them.

MANUSCRIPTS ON DEPOSIT. In such cases the Library is willing to receive the manuscripts on deposit. They are treated as other papers are treated, but the fact of their ownership is made of record, and they will be returned on demand. The return of such papers is, however, requested very seldom.

The manuscript collections in the Library are intended for scientific use by the writer and scholar, and others who have a legitimate interest in them. They are in a public institution for public uses.

RESTRICTIONS ON USE OF MANUSCRIPTS. Nevertheless, they are not intended to be used for sensational purposes, and the Library does not permit them to be so used. Sensational writers, however, do not resort to the manuscripts in the Library, because they do not know how to use manuscripts.

Some manuscripts, however, are highly confidential in their nature and contain revelations which may not properly be disclosed until after the passage of many years from the date of the events to which they relate. Such papers are guarded very carefully by the Library. They are locked in steel safes and kept

CONFIDENTIAL MANUSCRIPTS.

secret until the date has arrived when, by agreement, they may be put upon the shelves.

Following is the approved form of gift or bequest to the Library:

FORM OF GIFT OR BE-
QUEST.

“To the United States of America,
to be placed in the Library of Congress
and administered therein by the au-
thorities thereof.”





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